

The Decline and fall of classical civilizations

The classical civilizations of Rome, China (Han) and India (Gupta) all fell to Hun invaders, but only after they had begun to fall apart internally.

China

About 100 A.D. the Han started to decline. The bureaucracy became corrupt and the power of the central government weakened. Local landlords became more powerful as government control and supervision declined. They increased the tax burden on the peasants and took many of their farms. As peasant unrest grew, a revolutionary movement emerged called the Yellow Turban. The Yellow Turbans were Daoists; their attempts at revolution failed.

Compounding this political weakness and peasant unrest was the effect of several devastating epidemics that wiped out nearly half the population. With all this internal turmoil, the weakened Han dynasty could not fend off the advance of the Hun invaders.

Even though the Han fell and initiated a period of chaos, there was not a permanent disruption of Chinese civilization. Briefly, the Sui dynasty ruled. Then in 618 the Tang dynasty emerged as one of the most glorious in Chinese history. They reinstated Confucian thought and revived and improved upon the Han style of bureaucracy. After the Hun invasions and the fall of the Han dynasty, the Chinese never had to reinvent their civilization.

India

After the death of Ashoka, the Mauryan dynasty became financially weak and could not hold together the empire. They were finished off by an invasion by Bactria, the Greek speaking empire formed in the wake of Alexander the Great's invasion. Even though the northwest part of India became unstable, a new regional family rose to unite most of the subcontinent into another empire. This family was the Gutpas and formed the second half of India's classical age.

The Gupta Empire was not as centralized as the Mauryans under Ashoka. They remained divided into regions where local politicians made most of the laws and decisions. When the Huns attacked, the empire easily fell apart along the fault lines of the local regions.

Interestingly, after the fall of the Gutpas the invading Huns simply integrated into the warrior caste of Hinduism and ruled the regions locally. With the social structure of India intact, much of its culture survived. The ruling warriors, however, had no use for the peaceful and contemplative religion of Buddhism, and its influence declined during this time as a result. Hinduism gained ground that it had lost under Ashoka. After the Guptas, Indian trade and prosperity hardly missed a beat until Muslim traders gained control of the Indian Ocean. However, Indian classical culture was preserved through Hinduism and the caste system.

India remained divided into separate regions for a very long time. The next major threat, however, would come from Islam. Indeed, the next time India would be united again it would be in the 16th century under the Islamic Mughal dynasty.

Rome

The fall of the Roman Empire was very complex and is still debated among historians today. But things that are agreed upon are the following. As the Roman Empire grew, it required more soldiers to patrol its borders and frontiers. This brought a high tax burden on a population that was decreasing because of plague and poverty. Likewise, Rome Emperors and the upper classes adopted increasingly luxurious and extravagant lifestyles at the expense of the tax paying citizens. This caused not only great resentment among the lower classes, but the upper classes became more self-centered and less concerned about social and political responsibilities. New artistic and cultural styles were not being created. People came to view life as futile and meaningless. Weakened politically, economically, culturally, and psychologically, the Roman Empire no longer had the strength or the desire to fend off the Germanic invaders.

As the empire started to weaken, farmers and laborers clustered around powerful regional landowners to whom they surrendered full allegiance in return for military protection. Thus people looked to their local landlords rather than to the Empire for protection and stability. As this decentralization took place, the vast Mediterranean trade routes fell out of Roman hands.

The Emperor Diocletian tried to stop this decentralization. He reformed the system of administration and persecuted Christians whose allegiance to God he blamed for the weakening of Roman civil life. Then the emperor Constantine, who converted to Christianity, used his religion to try to unify the Empire spiritually. He created a new capital, Constantinople. However, neither of these Emperors could save the crumbling Empire.

The last Roman Empire in the west was displaced by Germanic armies in 476. Mediterranean culture, which had been put together by the Hellenism of Alexander and the Roman Empire itself, was fragmented. Unlike the classical civilizations of India and China, this Mediterranean classical civilization suffered a complete death. "For Greece and Rome had not put together the shared political culture and bureaucratic traditions of China that could allow revival after a period of chaos. Nor had Mediterranean civilization . . . generated a common religion that appealed deeply enough, or satisfied enough needs, to maintain unity amid political fragmentation, as in India."

One unique thing about the fall of Rome, however, was that the eastern portion, called the Byzantine Empire, did not really fall. But this Empire did not gain the entire inheritance of Mediterranean classical civilization. It more accurately mirrored the political system of late imperial Rome. Thus the fall of the Empire was more devastating in the west, while in the east a unique culture—not completely of Mediterranean origin—thrived.